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STATE REPRESENTATIVE ♦ 42ND ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony for SB 690

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps Bill

Senate Committee on Transportation, Tourism, Forestry and Natural Resources

April 14th, 2010

The Wisconsin Conservation Corps operated in Wisconsin from 1983 until 2003 and at its height employed over 300 youth and young adults doing outdoor work in 60 crews across the state. This popular program helped produce a generation of young leaders, taught new skills to at-risk youth, and resulted in hundreds of projects that improved parks and conservation lands throughout the state. As someone who has worked side-by-side with WCC crews, this program's reemergence is significant, and timely for confronting the challenges we face today.

Senate Bill 690 reestablishes the Wisconsin Conservation Corps (WCC), to build on our tradition of stewardship of our state's natural resources, and to provide our state's young people with work and educational opportunities. The WCC seeks to protect, enhance, and provide access to Wisconsin's natural heritage and encourage and enable young people to learn the value of work in a natural setting by providing employment training and career pathways.

During these difficult economic times, reestablishing the Wisconsin Conservation Corps is more important than ever. WCC will serve 18-25 year olds, and half of WCC crews must have no postsecondary education, and who have a family income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Simply put, we want to take youth who are at risk and without work, and provide them the discipline and respect of a regular employment, while teaching them marketable skills.

The WCC would be housed in the Department of Administration and a board would provide direction and facilitate projects. A third-party organization specializing in conservation will be charged with the administration of the WCC and supply programming for corps members.

Senate Bill 690 recreates the WCC primarily by leveraging newly available federal AmeriCorps funding. In Wisconsin, AmeriCorps funding is administered by Serve Wisconsin. We expect that more than \$7 million will be available in 2010 for Wisconsin's AmeriCorps-funded efforts – twice as much funding as in 2009. Other federal legislation will likely bring additional funding allocated to the states for youth corps programs.

The program itself requires commitments from the Department of Natural Resources, the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands and other state agencies willing to use existing funding for the program. In addition to upfront capital, the state match can also be accounted for by using existing funding for state programs, such as high school equivalency degrees offered by the Technical Colleges.

This is enabling legislation. The bill does not appropriate funding, but rather directs DOA to develop a plan for administering the program and identify funding sources – that plan will receive review and approval by the Joint Finance Committee.

The companion bill, AB 910 passed out of the Natural Resources Committee 14-1 and passed the Joint Committee on Finance yesterday. There is one amendment to be voted on which was suggested by members of Assembly Natural Resources Committee. Senate Amendment 1 would cap total state expenditures at \$400,000, and it would specify that the appropriation must be reviewed by the Joint Committee on Finance.

While drafting this bill, Senator Miller, Representative Mason and I organized a workgroup of many members from Serve Wisconsin, the Board of Commissioners of Public Lands, the Department of Administration, the Department of Natural Resources, the Natural Resources Foundation, the Technical Colleges, UW-Colleges/Extension, nonprofit conservation crews and former WCC executive directors, crew leaders and members.

Just like during the Great Depression, our nation and state face major challenges today. The advent of a Civilian Conservation Corps brought hope to many young workers struggling to find employment, and we can do that again on a state level with a new Wisconsin Conservation Corps. WCC was an organization that meant a great deal to a lot of people, and by reviving this popular program, Wisconsin will be investing in new jobs and keeping a proud tradition of conservation alive.